

All Aboard

The Progressive Caucus Economic Human Rights Bus Tour Leaves the Station

EATONTON, GA.

Harry Belafonte is back. "Once again, here come these Yankee niggers from the north with their Communist principles disturbing our tranquillity of life," Belafonte tells the country folks in the pews of the Jefferson Baptist Church. They laugh. It's been decades since Belafonte, 72, first came to Georgia to put his famous face on the front-line fight for social justice.

His message hasn't changed much. The civil rights movement may have buried Jim Crow, but the American dream continues to bypass millions of Americans, both black and white.

Out front, a sheriff's deputy is parked, lights flashing, keeping an eye on things. He's here not to harass, but to direct traffic around the arrival of the Congressional Progressive Caucus' Economic Human Rights Bus Tour and attendant media caravan. The bus tour, which visited Atlanta and its rural environs on Nov. 11 and 12, was organized by the Institute for Policy Studies and Food First in cooperation with the 55-member Progressive Caucus. Unexpectedly, the House was still in session, which cut into congressional attendance. However Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) and Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) did embark. Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.), home with the flu, sent her mother and aunt.

The tour aims to give some cohesion to the diffuse American left by forging links between the caucus, national policy research institutes, local grassroots groups and poor people's movements. "It's an infrastructure problem," says Chuck Collins of the Boston-based United for a Fair Economy. "There is all this activity at the local level, there are the national leadership groups, and there is the Progressive Caucus in Congress, but there is a disconnect between them all."

To remedy that situation, the coordinators of this progressive road show have adopted human rights as an overarching framework that they think can bring these disconnected political players together. Anuradha Mittal of Food First puts it this way: "A growing grassroots movement is reshaping the political environment and putting human rights on the agenda."

The idea is to recast the popular definition of human rights to include not just civil and political rights but economic rights—particularly those enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These include the right to protection against unemployment, equal pay for equal work and remuneration that ensures an existence worthy of human dignity; the right to rest and leisure; and the right to an adequate standard of living, "including food, clothing, housing and medical care and social services."

Says Mittal, "In these times when everyone is talking about an economic boom, the bus tour has made it very obvious to all the participants, including the congressional



By Joel Bleifuss

representatives, that we need to ask, 'Economic boom for whom?'"

The Progressive Caucus used the occasion of the tour to release detailed position papers on health care and income inequality. This marked the first time that the caucus has taken a stand as a group. Positions on education, Social Security, taxation, the budget and foreign policy are in the works. The caucus plans to turn its position papers into a progressive agenda that will be

released in conjunction with the president's January State of the Union message.

At the Antioch Baptist Church food pantry in Atlanta, a tower of Air Crisps, bound in plastic wrap, is slowly disassembled as church volunteers—all black—pack food boxes. In an adjoining room, about 100 people—all black and poor—wait on rows of folding metal chairs. Names are called, people walk up to the window that connects the pantry with the waiting room, they turn in their number, are handed their weekly food box and then leave through the back door. Voices are hushed. No one is happy to be there. "The stuff I get here I don't have money to pay for no way," says an elderly woman, who explains, shamefaced, that her small Social Security check does not provide enough to live on.

According to the USDA, the number of Americans defined as "food insecure," those who go hungry at some point in the year, jumped 20 percent in the past two years, increasing to 36



million. After hearing testimony from former food pantry clients at a luncheon in the Antioch Baptist dining room, Conyers told the assembled church volunteers and social workers, "We have to get more congressmen hitting the road and finding out what is happening to everybody." That line

received the biggest applause of the day. Apparently, most people believe most members of Congress are clueless.

The caucus task force on income inequality, chaired by Lee and McKinney, wants to bridge both that chasm and the one that separates the haves from the have-nots. To that end, the task force has set out a "Campaign to Close America's Economic Divide." The plan calls for introducing a package of legislative initiatives to address disparities in both income and wealth, and then forming a "national leadership steering committee" to put the issue and the proposed legislation before the public through a coordinated media campaign, educational forums and local actions. Legislation currently pending in Congress that the caucus could endorse includes Lee's A Living Wage, Jobs for All bill, which would promote a framework for full employment and economic human rights, and Rep. Bernie Sanders' (I-Vt.) Livable Wage Act, which would increase the minimum wage to \$6.50 and index it to the cost of living.

A similar call for human rights was delivered at the next bus stop, Grady Memorial Hospital, the Atlanta region's only public hospital. The tour heard testimony from representatives of the Grady Coalition, a group of hospital patients and health care providers who had successfully fought off a move to hike the hospital's rates. According to the hospital's own estimates, the rate hike would have resulted in an increase of 6,500 deaths or cases of severe illness among the indigent population that depends on the hospital for health care. Lee believes the profit-driven health care industry should be abolished. "A single-payer, national health care system makes more sense," she says. Lee says she plans to introduce a bill that would establish a national health service in the next Congress.

But such legislation will only pass if Congress gets an infusion of new blood. Conyers prescribes a public mobilization to elect progressives to Congress. "Every state in the union has to have representatives who will vote with the Progressive Caucus," he says. "We have to learn to organize like we did in the civil rights movement." For her part, Lee urges progressives not to abandon party politics. "There is dis-

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connect between grassroots organizations and party organization," she says. "It is necessary for progressives and for members of grassroots organizations to get involved in local Democratic Party organizations and take over the party."

Not everyone on the bus tour was with that program. Like many on the left, Cheri Honkala, leader of the Philadelphia Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWURU), has little use for Congress. She seeks to mobilize an army of the poor. "We cannot legislate our freedom, we must free ourselves," she told the audience at the Georgia Hunger Coalition. In October, the KWURU organized a march from Washington to the United Nations calling for an end to poverty, an event that got little notice in the mainstream media. "I don't care if they don't see us on the TV," she says, "millions will be marching in the streets."



PHOTOS: JOEL BLEIFUSS

ABOVE: Volunteers at the Antioch Baptist Church food pantry pack boxes for some of the 250 families served each week. **OPPOSITE LEFT:** Harry Belafonte is mobbed by autograph seekers at a high school in Decatur, Georgia.

But the bus tour demonstrated that what really gets people on their feet these days are celebrities. In its coverage of the tour, CNN sought out actor Danny Glover and Belafonte, ignoring the members of Congress. At an all-black high school in Decatur, a couple thousand of students cheered as Glover took the stage. He spoke of the need to listen to the stories of people who are affected by the downside of the current economic boom. "The 21st century has to be about our stories," he said. "The stories that allow us to redistribute wealth in this country." The students cheered some more.

Don't discount the power of a famous face. "I use my celebrity to convince those who don't think the issue is big enough," Belafonte says. "They need a hook, and I'll be the bait."

Belafonte has been down this road before. And he and Glover will be on board next year for the second leg of the Progressive Caucus Economic Human Rights Bus Tour. (Alabama, the Mississippi Delta and New England are potential destinations.)

"It's almost like déjà vu," Belafonte says. "I came here 35 years ago on this kind of mission. I would have thought that by now we wouldn't have to be doing this kind of work. It is discouraging that we have to come back again. But given that we have to, it is encouraging that there is an audience that is up to the task." ■